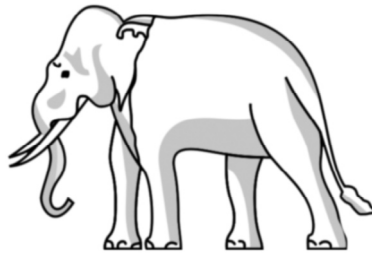


Bangkok Slip

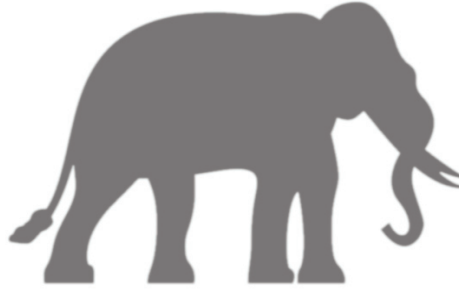
~ A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE ~



B.D. Woolman

Published by Bruce Woolman 2015

First Printing MMXV



For Elin

Copyright © 2010 by Bruce D. Woolman

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

ISBN: 978-1-329-02198-3

Acknowledgments

I wish to offer sincerest thanks to my many supporters over the years. First to my wonderful wife, Elin Schilling, for her patience and understanding. Then to the late Robert Ducas, whose promotional efforts and support meant so much in the early days – I also include here for thanks Dr. James Childs, our mutual friend.

Special thanks also go out to Dr. Pamela Ball for her superb manuscript edit. And, lastly, a special debt of gratitude goes to Ms. Kelley Haldorsen, whose keen and practiced eye helped me finalize the book design and re-think the cover.

B.D.W. 21 April 2015

All the characters in this book are fictitious, any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.



Prologue

IF NEWT, MY HOUSEKEEPER, had not been terrified of the ghost in my garbage disposal then I would not be around to write this account.

Read this odd connection as a Thai variation on the Butterfly Effect. The idea is this: A butterfly flaps her wings in Maui. This stirs a tiny eddy of air that, stage by stage, spins its way up into a typhoon that crosses the Pacific Ocean and erases a Japanese island or two, and then, perhaps, Rangoon. Chaos Theory 101.

The butterfly moment came when I was returning to my Bangkok apartment from a particularly unpleasant whitewater expedition in upcountry Thailand—my ride through the rapids was accomplished without a raft.

Given all that had taken place in the previous seventy-two hours I should have known better than to go home, but I went anyway. Poor impulse control can be a general plus for a journalist, but this time it worked against me. Come to think of it, it usually worked against me.

I arrived home—a condo overlooking Bangkok’s Chao Praya River—in a state of dull fury. I was filthy, ragged, bruised, and exhausted. I was limping badly from a sprained ankle.

Since I no longer possessed a housekey I pounded on my door. No answer. Out of habit I twisted the handle. Sometimes Newt left the lock off when she was moving laundry up and down stairs. It turned. I pushed through. My living room was in shambles. Furniture was upended. Tapes, CDs, books, dishes, and assorted underwear littered the thick white carpet.

“Newt,” I yelled, my panic building. Silence. I walked towards the bedroom. Then, from behind, I heard an all-too-familiar Australian brogue addressing me. “Nice you dropped by. Stupid of you, but nice just the same.” The Crocodile

Dundee twang had emerged from the face of a wallet-sized Chinese gangster I had nicknamed Little Boy the first time I saw him several days before. But, whereas he loomed small, the pistol he was holding, a Browning nine millimeter, loomed large. He stepped from the shadows of the kitchen nook into the living room. His fat brother—who I had cleverly dubbed Fat Man—materialized next to him holding a matching Browning. As was their habit they were matched in dress as well. Today it was tan slacks and pale-blue polo shirts.

“Where’s Newt?” I shouted.

“Shut up,” replied Little Boy. Then he turned to his brother. “See if he still has our guns, Eddie.”

I allow I had relieved them of their firearms during our previous meeting, which, from my perspective, had gone rather well.

Fat Man walked over. While Little Boy covered me, the big Asian gave me a good frisking, never once getting into the line of fire. “Why did you keep this piece of shit?” he said, as he worked an old Colt revolver from my pocket. He tried to pocket it, but failing, tossed it into the corner.

“Where’s Newt?” I yelled again.

“Shut up,” said Fat Man.

“I’ll shut up when I get some answers,” I shouted. “Where’s Newt, my housekeeper? Where is she, you shitbag?”

“Little woman?” asked Fat Man sarcastically. “Five feet tall or so? Cute, black hair, big brown eyes?” He shrugged his shoulders. “Haven’t seen her.” He turned to Little Boy and raised his brows in exaggerated innocence. “Have you seen her, Martin?” Then he brought up his gun. He was close, but out of reach. “Maybe she’s with your girlfriend up in Burma.” He narrowed his eyes and pushed the gun even closer, but not close enough. “Now, I have a question. Where are they?”

“Where are what?”

“You know what, the computer parts, the hard drives. Where, you fucking thief?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied. It was a lie. I did know what he was talking about.

Fat Man’s purplish lips compressed themselves. He shoved the Browning into his flabby waistband and narrowed his eyes. “All right then. Cover him, Martin. I’ve an idea how to make this cheap journo tell us just whereabouts he hid the bloody things. I’ve been thinking about it all morning. It’s a trick I learned from a bloke in Sydney. I was praying I would have the chance when I saw the electric pig.” Then he turned to me with a smile. “Stand still and give us your paw, but first

BANGKOK SLIP

kiss it good-bye. You've gotten us into a lot of trouble with Uncle Lim.”

I decided not to resist because Little Boy's knuckle was turning white on his trigger finger. And I did not like it that his eyes were rolling around in a funny way. I had no idea what Fat Man wanted as he snatched my forearm up into a powerful grip. Little Boy moved over and kept me well covered. They wanted me alive because they thought I had information.

In truth, I had little. Although I had stolen the hard drives, I did not know for sure where they were. I had entrusted the hardware to my girlfriend, Terry Parks, who was, I had just now learned for certain, safely across the border in Burma; that is, safe until Burmese Army regulars overran her place of refuge.

He forced me over towards the sink. It finally dawned on me that 'electric pig' was an old-fashioned Britishism for garbage disposal. Things suddenly snapped into focus: The old sausage-mill routine.

I recalled from a previous life that it was the way Shanky Dog had recouped a fifteen-thousand dollar heroin debt from Billy Barclay in Baltimore City one Christmas Eve. He never did have to grind him, at least as the Shank told it, but Billy did wet his pants. I resolved to try not to.

Fat Man now used both hands on my right forearm. I guess his arm was a little bit better—he had hurt it earlier in the week playing with a friend of mine. We went closer to the sink. I struggled, but not, I hoped, hard enough to alarm Little Boy into shooting me. Fat Man pushed my hand toward the drain. I resisted a bit, but did not put my heart into it. I had remembered a little something—a little something that had to do with, ghosts, chaos theory and typhoons.

Before I continue, perhaps I should introduce myself and then fill in some of the gaps in the story to date. My name is Ted Oldfield. To dignify what I do by calling it journalism would be pretension itself. Hack writing gets it better. I ply my craft for an Asian publishing house run by an old friend who is too Chinese to let an old friend starve. Besides, in Asia the only qualification needed for an English-language reporter is an ability to string one declarative sentence after another together so that the verbs agree (mostly) and the plurals are, well, plural.

It should be apparent to anyone with the sense God gave a parakeet that by the time I confronted the two Sino Australians that my life had gotten unmanageable. On reflection I would say the current high level of complication all started a night about six weeks earlier when I hooked up with my old friend Terry Parks at a Narcotics Anonymous dance party back in the US and, much to my surprise—but not to hers—fell in love with her.



Chapter 1

“CARE TO DANCE?”

“Not really, Ted.”

“Oh, come on, Terry. Just for a little while?”

Terry shrugged her shoulders. “Okay, just for a little while.”

We edged onto the floor and started shuffling around to the beat of some anonymous urban funk, but I was surprised to see Terry so subdued. Her movements were tentative; her hazel eyes hunted the corners of the room. She was not awkward exactly, but self-conscious, like a teen at an adult party.

“I thought I could manage,” she said, shaking her head and breaking step, “but I hate this. It’s like I think people can tell I used to dance naked. Christ! I even feel naked. Can I sit down, Ted? Sorry. It has nothing to do with you.” She gave me an apologetic, backward glance as she walked towards the table and sat down.

The little incident sticks in my mind because later that evening everything changed for us. And I guess the awkward dance kicked up a lot of feelings between Terry and me.

The passion that ultimately overwhelmed us that night was not sudden. It had been simmering for years. The truth is that Terry and I were more than old friends;

BANGKOK SLIP

we were recovery pals in Narcotics Anonymous. We had spent a lot of time bumming around together getting clean. Great buddies, but never lovers. These days my job kept me mostly in Bangkok. And, although we actively corresponded, we rarely saw each other.

I looked over at her. Some inner reef of shame had blocked her from one of life's simple pleasures. I understood it, but it hurt to see it.

Then I noticed in myself a certain tenderness towards her that I had never felt before. To my mind Terry's beauty, combined with her street toughness, had always lent her a mantle of invulnerability. Now, as we sat there, that illusion crumbled and I felt embarrassed—not for myself—but because my pestering had caused my friend such misery.

It only took her a few moments to regain her usual composure. She swept a thick lock of blond hair out of her face, sipped her lemonade and adjusted the shoulder strap on her black cocktail dress. Then she smiled at me. "I always forget what a big SOB you are," she said as she peered at me over the rim of her oversized paper cup. "But I think you lost some weight."

"Been working out," I replied. "I'm motivated these days. You should see my new health club in Bangkok. It's a palace, orchids in the locker room, river view. I go every day. And after all that concerted torture it's just a little bit harder for me to indulge."

"I'm the reverse," she said. "When I hit the gym, I want to reward myself. I feel like, if I worked it off, I deserve a treat. But you know how sugar kicks my ass. I wake up and can't get back to sleep: a mild version of those three-AM horrors."

"The addictive metabolism at play," I said.

A shadow fell across the table and we looked up. A tall guy in a black NA-Way tee shirt was leaning over us. He looked at me. "Hi, Ted. Mind if I borrow Terry for a dance?" he said amiably.

"She's not mine to lend," I replied. "Better ask her."

Amusement glinted in Terry's eyes. But she looked at me, not at him when she replied. "You know I don't dance, Sweet."

"But I just saw—"

"Failed experiment."

He took us both in. He looked at Terry again and comprehension lit his eyes. "Nice seeing you, Terry. You in town long, Ted?" he asked, moving away.

"About three weeks."

"Maybe I'll catch you at a meeting. 'Night, Terry."

“Night, Sweet.”

“Sweet?” I inquired when he was out of earshot. “How’d he know my name?”

“Oh, you know him. Uptown Group, Saturdays. That’s how he knows you. Jonathan Sweetbaum, lawyer.”

“Oh that guy. Sweetbaum. Hardly recognized him. I remember him, though. We used to lay odds on how long he’d live.” I laughed. We were both silent for a while.

The DJ spun a hip hop side and cranked the volume.

“Do you want to go?” Terry shouted.

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure you were going to show.”

“Neither was I,” she said, laughing. “I knew you’d ask me to dance.”

“Let’s take in the boardwalk. It’s not too chilly,” I said.

“If the pier is open we can go on rides.”

“French fries,” I yelled.

“Careful, guy, you’ll spoil me,” she shouted into my ear as we made our way out through the crowd. We played around in the amusement areas for a while, and then took a walk down the boards. The surf was loud; a strong sea breeze roared in our ears. The September air was tolerably warm, but had a bite to it, a whisper of far-away ice. We walked closely together, shoulders bumping occasionally, heads slightly bowed to the wind. Terry began talking, her speech directed toward herself as much as to me.

“You can’t stay sober and stay in the life. It’s the hooker’s dream, you know, clean, sober and all that easy money. I think about it sometimes, the money, but it doesn’t happen, at least not often. Most people can’t do both it seems.”

She paused, turned and stood at the rail of the boardwalk to face the sea and I joined her. Her special scent now blended with creosote, salt and seaweed. The thundering breakers were just visible across the strand, ruffled white lines in the semi-darkness. Wind hissed across the pale beach.

I didn’t say anything, so she continued. “Not possible for me. But I know people.” Terry paused and then gave me a serious look. “To my mind a woman should be free to sell herself if she can hack it. I mean, What belongs to you more than your body? Making prostitution illegal is just a way of putting the money into men’s pockets. Pimps. Cops. Sexism dressed as morals. Just another personal service is all, along the lines of cutting hair.”

She smiled. “Well, maybe more personal. But, so long as it’s something you decide to do yourself, Who’s business is it but yours?” She shook her hair out in

BANGKOK SLIP

the wind. “I cleared fifty-five thousand this year butchering hair at Salvadoro’s. It’s peanuts compared with what I made before as a dancer and out in Vegas, but I’m grateful as hell. He’s been pretty good to me, you know. Sent me to Vidal Sasoon School and all—in London. Then, last year, he even brought me into the business. He needed cash and I had some—a lot actually.” She smiled faintly. “Thrifty me. He sold me stock. It’s a good business, Ted. I want a future. I think I did well, too. Even Sweet said so. Sal’s been expanding like crazy. He has a new partner.”

“I think you’ve got a future,” I said in a low voice.

Terry smiled. “I think so, too. He’s been talking up some deal he says is going to make a truckload of money. Remember that Asian guy you were talking to at Sal’s party the last time you were here about a year ago? He was very fem, wore a touch of eye makeup and a Savile Row suit? Rich.”

I dredged up a name. “Mr Paul?” He was a Thai. We had chatted a bit. I speak the language.

“Yeah, Mr Paul. Can’t even say his last name—even if I could remember it. Well, he’s the partner. They’ve been seeing a lot of each other recently and something’s up. Sal’s real excited about it. They talked on the phone a lot lately and now he’s back. Did Mr Paul get in touch with you or anything there? I saw you trade cards.”

“No, he didn’t. Bangkok’s as big as New York. I only know Mr Paul slightly, from here. Funny I should meet a Thai here, and through Sal of all people. But Mr Paul’s got to be rich or important; he’s attached to that Thai trade delegation I’m covering. It’s no coincidence we’re both here at the same time again.”

“Oh, yeah. What’s it all about? What’s the story you’re doing?”

The wind roared around my ears, but I could see Terry was genuinely interested so I continued. I raised my voice to the wind. “Boring stuff mainly. US import quotas are a big deal over there—bread and butter—and a Thai business newspaper writes my checks. But the big story is that there are movements in the US Congress to punish the Thais on trade issues because they have not done enough to discourage the flesh trade, particularly in young girls, kids really—slavery. Anyway, after-hours these Thai delegates will try to put out some fires.

Some Congressmen are very worked up over a new report from a United Nations funded human rights outfit, and they’re loaded for bear.”

I warmed to my topic. “It’s pretty amazing. It’s the cops, you know, who run the brothels. The Thai government really doesn’t have that much control over their police—law unto themselves. Corruption on steroids. Meat and potatoes to a hack like me. Anyway, it’s like a lot of places.”

“Yeah, like Vegas.” Terry laughed nervously. Then she hugged herself, smoothed her heavy blonde hair from her face, and turned to look at me. Her hazel eyes were wide and serious.

“I’ll have eight years in December if I don’t pick up. My mother called the other day. She’s so fat these days. She was drunk, too—big surprise. Anyway, she told me how jealous she was. She said I was in my prime and that I should do more for her. She wants...” Terry looked away from me, out to sea, and her voice went low and funny. “Kids in warehouses. It’s weird. Did I tell you that when I was fourteen mom sold my virginity for three-thousand dollars to a Japanese guy?” Terry snorted out a little laugh. “He was hung like a cashew. Lucky for me, though. What a riot.”

“No,” I said slowly, “you never told me that.”

“She was flat broke. She had lost a lot of money at blackjack. We left Vegas for Florida that very night. She wanted to work the big hotels there. She dressed me up like a little girl—well, littler than I was, anyway. We cruised the lobbies together—I was just a shill. She wasn’t... I prostituted myself later, in Atlanta—you remember from my story—but she just turned me out that once... with Mr Cashew. Not that it’s any excuse. She said she was desperate.” Terry gave me a hard look. “I may think it should be legal, but turning out kids? That’s just about the worst thing in the world. Ask me. I know.” Terry grabbed the rail and leaned back, arching her back and swinging down a bit, bending her knees and stretching her arms and shoulders in the process as she talked.

“Anyway, with a kid like me along the house detectives were less likely to think she was a pro. I mean, they wouldn’t have thrown her out, they would’ve shaken her down. She was beautiful in those days, and very smart.”

I had known Terry for a long time, but she never talked this way. This stuff about her early life she left out of her ‘story’, the tale of woe and triumph that recovering people are encouraged to tell occasionally at 12-step meetings.

She had never lied exactly, she had just left the impression that her addiction began when she left home. It’s just that she never said what her home had been. Now she was letting me in.

Terry smiled fondly. “We had a great time in Florida that winter—a great time. Boy, did she make money, and at the track, too. She’s an ace handicapper, but she was getting inside tips from some of the high rollers. Bought a nice little house down there. She’s still smart.” Terry did another standing pull-up on the rail. “I forgave her two years ago. I had to, really. I mean I did it formally, in a letter. Sally M, my sponsor—she’s the only one who knows all this junk—made me. I hated

BANGKOK SLIP

her so much—mom, not Sally—but you know we have to forgive people, get on with our lives. We talk now, mom and me. It’s okay.”

I was at a loss. Terry had come of age on the other side of a peep show spy hole. Me? I’m a typical, no-real-excuse dope fiend from suburbia. Even though I wound up on the streets for while, I’m straight from middle-class suburban America: Bethesda, Maryland. There was, to say the least, a big culture gap between us. It was time to reply, but I didn’t quite know what to say. How do you forgive somebody—your mother for Christ’s sake—for introducing you to a life of prostitution? But then again, how do you not?

The wind had penetrated my light jacket. “What’s the matter?” she asked. “Are you mad at me?”

“Furious,” I said with a smile. “You walked out on our dance number. Remember?”

“Oh, well,” she said, appearing to take me a little more seriously than I intended, “I’ll try again at next year’s convention. I am just a work in progress, you know. But I have been a little blue lately; I get that way.” She gave me a rare, shy smile—nothing feline in it at all. The breeze increased a notch and I heard the awnings on the shuttered shops start to pop. Just as she looked away Terry smiled again. This time it was a self-directed, secret smile.

“It’s cold,” I said. “I’ll take you back to the beach house.”

“You can come in if you like.”

“I always like.”

Terry and I had been friends for eight years—which is how long we had both been clean—but, as I said, romance was never a part of it. There had been a time, though, when the world might have told you we were lovers; we were joined at the hip for about eighteen months.

In those first months of our recovery we both had had to admit to ourselves that we suffered from many problems with relationships—to put it mildly. It seemed a given that, if we slept together, it would end our comfortable and valued friendship. So we did not.

We had even talked about it; the attraction was there. But Terry went through men. I went through women. Not that we were not trying to do better at real life; it is just that we were a couple of pretty sick kids in adult packaging.

Then, after two years in the US cleaning up my act, I returned to Bangkok to take my old job back at Business Life Company, my Thai-based publishing house. So, if something had been about to develop between us, it just did not have the chance. We always corresponded, even when we got into more successful rela-

tionships. I nearly married a pretty Welsh hotelier, but could not—would not—follow her to Singapore. Terry lived with a Washington Post reporter whom she had met at an NA roundup, but he cheated on her and that ended it.

That night we were both free, and, well, it was just our time. Terry knew it earlier. I knew it as soon as we walked in the front door to the beach house and saw the look on her face.

“I did not lure you all the way from Bangkok to play Scrabble,” she said with her hands on her hips. Our long habit of friendship had immunized me to her earlier, more refined, signals.

“You didn’t lure me; I was coming over here already. Remember?”

“You talk too much,” she said, as she came towards me.

That night I stayed at the beach house, which Terry had rented along with another woman, Samantha—Sam she called her. Terry explained that Sam was an old friend of her mother. On hearing that Terry was renting a beach place for the week Sam offered to pitch in if she could come down just for the following weekend. On the third night, Terry got a call from Sam, who said she was not going to be able to make it after all.

I gave up my motel room. Over the next days we went to the beach together; that is, when we were not holed up in the house making up for lost time—and kicking ourselves for holding out for so long—or when Terry wasn’t at the Ocean Inn heading a workshop on personal inventory, 11th-Step meditation or some other recovery-related topic. Come to think of it, we saw very little of the beach.

Terry was an NA activist. As a result she was in a lot of the scheduled events. She went to a lot of meetings. She had exactly one million friends.

I took my cameras with me one day when we did actually make it to the beach. Terry mugged for me on the boardwalk and by the water. It was a pleasure to photograph her long tawny body clad in the fluorescent scraps that pass for swimwear. I set the Nikon on a trash can with the timer on and took pictures of us both in front of another trash can with the amusement pier behind us.

We were seldom alone when we walked outside. We never went more than ten feet on the boardwalk without Terry getting greetings. Occasionally, she stopped to give and receive the intimate body-to-body hugs that are a big part of the NA culture—some of the hugees, I noticed, were men.

We saw Sweet a couple of times, too. An exquisite little woman with a shoulder-length cascade of chestnut curls always accompanied him. Her name was Sharla.

BANGKOK SLIP

Sharla was one of Terry's pigeons; that is, someone she sponsored in the program. Sharla was a hard case. Terry, I recalled, had saved her life by sheer force. When Sharla came to Terry years before Terry broke an unwritten rule: she let Sharla live at her place. One day Terry came home to find her apartment stripped. She called her own sponsor Sally M and they went hunting. They knew where to go.

Eventually, after three days, they found Sharla in a shooting gallery in NE Washington DC geezing with the used needles from the ashtrays. She was just finishing the heroin she had bought with Terry's stereo, TV and microwave. They dragged her back to Terry's and took turns holding her hand, by that I mean they wouldn't let her go. Call it kidnapping if you want—Sally said Terry actually sat on Sharla. After the third day Sharla agreed to stay at a halfway house and use Terry and Sally as sponsors. Sally told me it was Terry who got through to her. Sharla has not used since. It has been seven years.

I got introduced to a lot of people at the convention, and a lot of people remembered me, too, but it was always Terry they were interested in. She was a star in our small tightly knit world of the healing wounded. The phone at the beach house rang all evening—until we would unplug it at midnight—and Terry would talk to her sponsees, some of them newcomers and some of them women she had known for years. She also called Sally M a couple of times while we were there. She kicked me out of the room for their chats, presumably because they were going to gab about me. Sally worked for the government and could not get away to the convention.

One night Terry got a call from her mom. She kicked me out for that one, too. It upset her enough to call Sally M right after, but she did not tell me much beyond the fact that her mother was still on her back.

As we were packing up to leave, Terry gave me a serious look. "Ted, will you stay at my place when we get back to Washington?"

"Well, gladly. But Terry—"

She must have seen something in my face. "I know, I know, Ted. But we've known each other for such a long time. I'm not trying to corner you. It's... You'll have to go back to Asia at the end of the month and, and... Well, I just want to see, to see how it works with you and me. I feel down for it Ted, and I know you do. So..." She held out her hands, palms up, *a fait accompli*.

She was right. I felt as though I had come home. I had told her how I felt that first night. And then I had showed her. But there were practicalities, brittle realities.

“But I’ll be going,” I said. “I have a job I love. I have an assignment coming up in Burma. It’s dangerous, but I can’t stop. It’s too important. And, I mean, is this wise? We can always be friends at twelve thousand miles. But lovers? Real lovers? What if it does work when I come stay with you now? What then? Even now I’m going to be miserable without you. This changes things.”

I wadded up the red tee shirt I was packing and used it as a prop. I gave her a serious sidelong look. “Right now we could backtrack.” I waved the shirt back and forth for emphasis. “It would be hard, but we could do it. We’re grown up enough. We could lie to ourselves and say it was convention fever, that we had always wanted to sleep together, and that we finally did, and that it was great. We could say ‘now it’s over’ and declare ourselves friends again.” Terry started to speak, but I motioned her to stop. “But if we chase this thing, Terry, both you and I know we’ll have decisions to make, major changes to our lives. Who is going to move where? All that kind of agonizing shit. We’ll have to pay a price.”

Terry just shook her head. I could see she was hearing me, but it wasn’t changing her mind. I was glad it wasn’t. It was not a case of masculine cold feet—well, not completely. I just had the sense, and the experience, to know that grown-up relationships fall prey to grown-up pressures. As did she.

“Let’s not project on it to much,” she replied. “Stay with me, Ted, and if we’re still feeling this good in three weeks we’ll talk about realities. I know you have a life that you love. I’ll admit I’m going to go crazy with you lost up there in that Burmese war zone,” she said gently. “You nearly got killed up there that time. Let’s not put the cart before the horse, though. Let’s not—”

“I thought you liked to do it buggy style.”

“Now you’re talking. And what, may I ask, are you doing way the hell over there?”

As a lover Terry was, well, strange sometimes. Not kinky, never sleazy, just strange. One night she shyly asked if I would indulge her in something. “Anything,” I said.

It turned out she wanted to listen to music when we made love.

“Why even ask? Just turn on your stereo.”

“I want it loud.”

“They’re your neighbors, but I sure don’t care.”

She laughed. “Well that’s why—I mean—I want to use my music player...”

To this day I can’t see a woman wearing headphones without getting a flashback.

After the first week it was clear to us both we had to talk. Not because things were bad, but because they were good. Terry sprang her surprise on me.

BANGKOK SLIP

“So now what?” I said to her. “It’s happened. We’re stuck.”

“I know,” she replied.

“So what are we going to do about it? That’s what I want to know.”

She smiled. “Why don’t I come live there?”

“To Bangkok?” I said with surprise. I had been reluctantly contemplating a return to the States. “You want to?” I paused a minute. “But what’ll you do? I mean, you can stay with me. But, Terry, won’t you get bored? After you shop and travel and stuff you’ll start to twitch. It’s a cool place, but it takes about two months before it starts to wear. And it’s hard to get work there. There are labor restrictions on foreigners. And you have a jillion friends here, meetings, a life you’ll miss.”

“Boy, are you optimistic,” she said. “Feet a little cold?”

“That’s not—”

She smiled again. “No, I’m kidding. I get you. And I agree. I’d go nuts without work.”

“So?”

“I have a job offer,” she said smugly, drawing out the ‘I’ for effect. “To be honest, I doubt I would have gotten into the sack with you if I didn’t think I had a chance of making it stick. This has been cooking for awhile.”

“What? The job or me?”

“Both,” she replied.

Something clicked. “I bet it has something to do with Mr Paul, Sal’s partner. You talked a little about it that night on the beach.”

“You guessed it, smartass.”

“Terry, that’s fantastic. What is it? When is it?”

She took my hand. “They want me to open some Western-style spa-type salons in a couple of hotels. I will style hair for the top clients as well as set up the salons and make sure they operate at standard. It’s real management, Ted. I’m so stoked. But I don’t think I would’ve gone unless we were... I mean, I’d be scared. It’s like mars to me over there.”

Her mood was contagious. “But it’s not really, Terry. There’s even an NA meeting in Bangkok. I helped to start it. It’s small. There’s my friend Ed and...”

“I know, I know, you told me.” She spread her arms and I stepped into them.

I asked about the job, but she had few details. Sal was away and Mr Paul was busy with the trade delegation. They were going to present her with a formal proposal soon. I let it go. Far be it for me to start running her life. Besides, I knew from experience that when it came to business matters Terry was notoriously sharp. That’s why it didn’t surprise me so much to hear about the offer.

B. D. WOOLMAN

Nevertheless, I thought it might be wise to do a little checking up on Mr Paul when I got back to Thailand—just my journalistic curiosity. The fact that he was rich and highly placed in the trade ministry did not mean he was okay.

Just a year earlier a Thai envoy had been caught using his diplomatic passport to smuggle heroin into the UK. I didn't share my concerns with Terry. I had met the guy, and he seemed right enough—a little too much eye liner, maybe, but what do I know?

Not much it turned out. If only I had stuck with my plan to check up on Mr Paul as soon as I landed in Bangkok. But my good intention got buried by a rush assignment in Burma. What is it that they say about the road to hell?



Chapter 2

IF I HAD NOT GONE to Burma, I would not have lost Terry. It's just that simple. Three weeks and three days after leaving her in Washington I was in the east Burmese jungle and I didn't want to be there anymore. I was in Manerplaw, the rebel stronghold of the Karen National Union, KNU for short. I was doing a story and I got stuck.

I was doing a story because it looked like the last year that Manerplaw would stand. That was news, big news. The soldiers of the KNU, their fathers and mothers, and their fathers and mothers had been fighting Burma's various ugly, backward and oppressive governments for autonomy since 1948.

At the time I was there the KNU was one of the world's oldest organized insurgencies. They had an army of four thousand and two major bases. The Karen were the strongest of many ethnic minorities fighting for independence from Rangoon.

Now, in its unending war with the Burmese State, the KNU faced a particularly despicable military junta: The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which had come to power by means of a bloody coup in 1988. Under international pressure SLORC held an election in 1990 that they were confident

they could rig. But the opposition, The National League for Democracy, headed by a woman, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won an overwhelming majority. ‘The Lady’, as the Western press likes to call her, was slated to become prime minister. It was not to be. SLORC crushed the National League and put The Lady under house arrest. A year after she was shut in she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. SLORC could not have cared less.

When I was stuck up in Manerplaw The Lady had been interred in Rangoon for half a decade.

So what does all that have to do with the KNU and my story? Just this: In 1990, during and after the secret Rangoon blood bath that followed the election, The Lady’s followers ran away from Rangoon if they could and were killed if they couldn’t. Many of them made their way here to Manerplaw, which lay roughly three hundred kilometers southeast of the city. And even though most were not ethnically Karen, they formed an alliance with the rebels. It was an alliance that the SLORC considered deadly. Rangoon’s intellectual democrats had linked with a highly motivated force of well-armed insurgents. They were also getting increased support from Thailand. SLORC was forced to act with renewed military vigor if it wanted to survive. And that is exactly what they did.

It was a story I had covered for years. Journalists are not welcome in Burma, period, so I had sneaked across the Moei River from Thailand. I was now in Manerplaw to talk to a certain Karen commander about the KNU’s grim military situation—SLORC was planning a major offensive. Kyaw, the unit commander I had come to talk with, had come to trust me over the years. Originally I had a strong ‘in’. Certain highly placed people in Bangkok had an ongoing interest in supporting the Karen cause. There were ethnic and business ties involved. For reasons too complicated to go into now I sometimes was asked by my boss and his cronies to deliver messages and money to Kyaw. And once, through no design of my own, I had found myself fighting alongside him. At first I had some real moral qualms about taking up arms—even hack writers have to draw the line somewhere. But then the SLORC started shooting. And besides, to hear my boss tell it, I’m not much of a journalist anyway.

In addition to talking to Kyaw, I was also there to interview some exiled National League leaders and to take some photographs of the place and the people who lived there. I had done all that and I was ready to leave, but I couldn’t.

I was stuck in Manerplaw because for some reason the Thai border police had sealed the crossings at the river by closing the ferries. Kyaw asserted that the usually porous border was sealed. Worse, SLORC activity was on the increase and

BANGKOK SLIP

land mines had even been laid on a few less-traveled donkey trails I might otherwise have used. So not only was I stuck, I was stuck for weeks.

The dry season was approaching, although one would hardly guess it from the look of the deep mud in the thatch and corrugated steel tangle that marked Manerplaw Village. Typically, the SLORC staged an offensive against the Karen in the dry season. This year it looked bad because the SLORC had bought a billion and a half dollars worth of weaponry from the Chinese, using money raised in part by taking tribute from opium warlords. One of Burma's major exports under SLORC was pure #4 heroin, some of it made by members of the SLORC Army in their own refineries.

As the dry season loomed nearer, my tensions rose. I was expecting Terry and I did not want to be trapped by the SLORC advance. As I said, it had happened once, two years before. I had been forced to remain in Manerplaw for a good part of the dry-season offensive.

"I need to get out of here, Kyaw," I said to the KNU commander. "I am two weeks overdue. My boss will worry, my girlfriend will worry. She's due in Bangkok any time and I am out of touch."

He shook his head sadly. "The ferries on the Moei River are still closed. So is the bridge. If the SLORC Army catches you, you will go to a Burmese jail. I remind you," he said with a grin, "you have no visa. And you have a certain reputation."

"So do you," I replied. "Do you think if I can get to the river that I will be able to cross?"

He shook his head again. "We are at the end of the wet season. I doubt you can cross. Stay awhile, Mr Ted, fight with us again; enjoy the food and the scenery." We had been eating broken rice, dried salt fish and bush tucker (read: lizards) three times a day. There were vegetables, however; they grew underwater in scummy ponds. "You're not such a bad fighter. And you have a good thought now and then. We can use another man."

I raised my palm. "No fighting for me this year. The only thing I like to shoot is my camera. I need to get out of here. I can swim the river."

"Water buffalo can also fly," he said.

"Shit."

"That, too."

Three days later, an hour before dawn, Kyaw slipped up to the thatched stilt house where I was lodged. I was already awake, brooding. I was out of film and out of patience.

“The ferry boats are working,” he said, “but there is a lot of enemy activity. Many SLORC soldiers are moving in the area and there are pocket patrols and porters on the east flank setting more mines. It is bad, Ted. But if you must go, you must do it now. I can only spare two men to guide you.”

“Thank you, Kyaw.”

“No,” he said, “thank you. I appreciate the work you and your paper do against the SLORC. Give your boss my best regards. And take this.” He proffered an old US Army officer’s side arm, a Colt 45 automatic.

I took the gun and dropped out the clip. It was well oiled and the ammunition was in good shape. I dry fired it then handed it back shaking my head. “If SLORC catches me and I am armed they may be more inclined to just kill me than investigate who I am. Better if I talk my way out of things.”

Kyaw nodded. “Makes sense. You could be right. Still—”

He, too, had a point. It was with regret that I watched him holster the pistol. “Pack your stuff,” he said.

“It’s packed.” I replied.

Soon after Kyaw introduced me to privates Nyan and Soe of the KNU. They were standing just outside my hutch, two thin shadows in the blue dawn.

“You boys know Mr Ted,” he said. “You must help him get to the river.” Judging from their looks they were not happy with the assignment. No reason to be. It was dangerous. “Help him,” said Kyaw, “but listen to him. He can fight when he has to. And sometimes, not often, but sometimes he can even be clever.” Kyaw grinned at me. Neither of the two young men looked particularly encouraged by these compliments. They inspected their boots and said nothing.

After a short breakfast of cold rice washed down with cold tea I set out with them on the fifteen-kilometer trail to the Moei River. They were two rangy, carnivorous looking Asian youths wearing baggy US-made tigerskins crisscrossed with bandoleers of machine-gun rounds. I felt better about refusing the handgun. Both lads were armed with Chinese-made Kalashnikov AK-47 knock-offs, a required accessory for a day trip in the Burmese jungle.

The air was very heavy as we set out on a foot trail that we were reasonably sure had not been mined. The end of the wet season is the wettest. The rains begin in April and become increasingly more frequent as the season wears on. By October they come once an afternoon and last three or four hours. In late autumn typhoons blow by as well, causing all-day rains that swell the rivers and wash out the roads even this far inland. Today, however, it was just normal late-wet-season oppression. It would build in heaviness all day and start to rain at 4:00pm sharp.

BANGKOK SLIP

We pressed on. I heard the rumble of distant thunder and took in the forest around me. Except for some low ferns the floor was fairly clear. Huge hardwood trees rose and canopied the world. Philodendron vines with heart-shaped leaves the size of doormats grew up the sides of some, others were bare. There were no large teak trees; they had been taken long ago. In the gathering storm the light was getting muddy. The trees rose up like pillars, their trunks as smooth and as gray as granite. Fleeting, I had the sense that I stood in the dim nave of an immense cathedral.

I opened my canteen and took a pull of the boiled tea. I had trouble putting the cap back on. My hands felt shaky. I could smell the coming rain. I shivered despite the heat and damp.

The humidity meant that the leeches would be bad—and they were. An environmentalist had told me that lots of leeches indicate that the rain forest is healthy. “Give me a sick one,” I’d told him.

Some time after noon Soe put out his hand to stop. “I smell something,” he said. “People. I will go forward; please remain here.”

Cautiously, he walked down the trail until he went out of sight around a bend and behind an immense fig tree. In about thirty minutes Soe reappeared from behind the giant fig tree. He put his fingers to his lips. “A mine-laying party is working ahead. Three soldiers. They have five porters roped together. The soldiers are laying the mines. The porters are carrying them. I recognized one of the porters. He is an old man from a nearby village.”

The SLORC army often force locals into labor as bearers. Sometimes they work them to death.

“The soldiers are only very young, maybe fifteen years old. But still we cannot go on. We must wait. I am glad the wind is this way. You smell very strong to us, Mr Ted. Sorry.”

I was not offended.

The young age of the soldiers was interesting. It was also common. SLORC was so illegal and loathed as a regime that they actually trusted no one in the country to join their rat-pack army—apparently they were devoid of self delusion—so they used boy children and gave them authority over adults in the hope that the kids would ultimately become loyal servants. And, as in the old Communist regimes, the young were encouraged to denounce their families.

“I will check on them,” said Soe. Then he disappeared as the rain started.

When he returned he was grinning. “They have built a shelter and are smoking ganja. They are just boys. Perhaps they will sleep.” He fingered the combat knife on his web belt and grinned.

“No,” said Nyan. “No need to start a fight. We must get Mr Ted safely to the river.” Soe nodded his head, but I could sense he was not happy. Then Nyan took his pistol from his belt and offered it to me. I pulled back my hand. He shook his head. “Better take it. These boys will never talk to you, just kill you and eat your liver.”

I took the handgun. It was the same model that Kyaw had offered me earlier. It rested uneasily in my hand as I sat in the rain in a camouflage poncho. We made no shelter. Soe went ahead to keep an eye on the SLORC unit, and to watch out for others.

Soe decided that when it got dark we should try to slip by them. He was confident that we could move on the trail at night, at least for some distance.

“What about the mines?” I asked.

“Yes, they are very dangerous. One must be cautious,” Soe said. I had been warned.

We moved out at dusk. Soe reported that the SLORC soldiers were dozing in their lean-to. They had been mining a small valley just ahead, a choke point on the trail, which ran between two rough hills. There was no way to circumvent the interdiction area without adding a half-day to our journey. But, what was worse, that detour would have taken us farther into the zone of SLORC control. We had to slip by or wait until they finished their deadly work and had moved on, work that would make the trail nearly impassable.

We headed down the moonlit trail. Soe and Nyan took turns on point, sharing the risk of tripping a mine. They categorically refused to let me take a turn. “If you are hurt Kyaw would probably kill us anyway,” said Soe. “You bring the money.”

We moved slowly through the silent forest. We glued our eyes to the trail. The moonlight was strong enough to illuminate any obvious disturbance to the earth, but even a casually concealed mine would be hidden from us. Each step was an agony. Sweat crept under my clothes in cold rivulets. We walked in single file tracing each other’s footsteps. I recalled an old twelve-step parable: Recovery is like walking through a mine field. Do what the winners do, step where they step and survive. Suddenly, the darkness was ripped with a flash and the silence shattered with explosion. Soe had tripped a mine. He lay on the ground moaning. His right foot was blown off.

The three SLORC soldiers immediately opened fire. I hit the ground and so did Nyan. Bullets tore through the leaves and smacked into the trees around us. We held our fire and crawled off the trail in the darkness, dragging Soe along with us.

BANGKOK SLIP

Nyan made a makeshift tourniquet from some cord in his pack and slowed the bleeding. I held the semi-conscious Soe down by his shoulders as his friend worked. I was racked with guilt. It was my impatience that had cost him his limb and probably his life. Kyaw had wanted me to stay and I should have. The whole adventure was stupid. I resolved to help Nyan get Soe back to camp.

Together we tried to clean the wound as well as we could with the boiled tea in our canteens. Hygiene now would pay off later. With growing clinical detachment I examined the leg as we worked. The wound was typical for one caused by a land mine. The foot was gone and the flesh of the lower leg was blown up and apart in what the field surgeons call a ‘cauliflower’. As bad as the damage was I knew from experience that the young man might well live if he could even get a rude amputation and antibiotics. We would have to take him back to Manerplaw. I told Nyan we would go back as soon as it could be arranged. “Mr Kyaw said you were anxious on account of your girlfriend,” said Nyan as he removed something from his pack. “Here, hold his leg still. I will inject some morphine.” Nyan punched the Syrette into his leg. “I think I can get Soe back safely by myself. You go on.”

“Not a chance. We’ll do it together,” I said.

“Kyaw will be angry.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “He’ll be happy to see me.”

Suddenly, I stiffened. A human shape moved nearby in the semi-darkness. Nyan reached for his weapon. An old man—one of the porters—came into view from behind a large tree.

“How did you find us?” asked Nyan.

“I smelled the big foreigner,” said the old man in the Karen language. Nyan chuckled. We relaxed.

The old man explained that he had slipped his bonds and run away during the confusion after the explosion and gunfire. I was not surprised that he had been able to escape; porters were retained more by fear than by chains.

Nyan gave the old man water. He began to speak. “They will come and look for me in the morning if I am missing. If I run away they will find me and beat me. I am weak; I have had little food. Give me that pistol and I will go back and kill them. They are boys, but they think they are men. One of them called me a motherfucker. Me, his elder! My wife has died doing this work for them. They left her there like a dog. Give me the pistol. I will go kill them now.”

“Are they looking for us?” asked Soe. The morphine had worked paradoxically to bring him to. His voice was hoarse with agony.

“No,” replied the old man. “They say the mine just killed a buffalo. But I think

they are afraid of you. They lie to themselves.”

Soe nodded and, just like that, handed him his pistol.

I did not like it. It was a suicide mission. No way could he approach the patrol at night. One would surely be on guard, particularly now, and they would gun him right down. Then, finding the pistol, they were sure to come gunning for us. Better, I thought, to let them continue to think that the mine had merely killed a buffalo.

The old man rose to leave. “Wait. I have an idea,” I said to him in Thai. He paused. I turned to Nyan. “Do you care to hear it?”

Nyan nodded. “Kyaw said we should listen to you.”

“Why not let the old man go back and sit with the other porters? When the SLORC come to free them for work let him choose his moment and shoot the soldiers when they least expect it. We will come in close and help him. Ask him what he thinks.”

“He does not have to. I speak English,” said the old man. “I am old enough.” He paused for a moment. “It is a good idea. I will do it.”

We conferred for a short while to solidify the plan. And then, in case he was missed, he slid off into the night. Since Burma was once an English colony you found the language in the oddest places, like an heirloom. A lot of the Karen spoke it. Also, in a world of Buddhists, many of the Karen were Christians. It set them apart.

Nyan was worried that all the old man had wanted was the gun and that he would run away with it. Soe, who was still quite alert despite his wound, insisted that the old man would do what he said.

We set out to take up our position closer to the camp. We left Soe propped up against a tree with the morphine and a full canteen. At his insistence I traded him the pistol for his Kalashnikov. He gave us the high sign as we set off in the direction of the camp. The moon set and true darkness descended. Nyan used his nose. “The wind is with us,” he whispered. “I can smell the porters.” He reached back and tugged me forward. The idea was to get as close as possible. Then, when the old man opened his surprise attack, we would give him supporting fire. With Soe down, there was no going forward or back until the SLORC patrol was neutralized.

I went forward with profoundly mixed emotions. I had no illusions about the deadliness of the enemy we faced. But it was dreadful to contemplate deeply or for long; they were teenagers indoctrinated into the religion of the gun. What did they know?

BANGKOK SLIP

We stopped behind a fallen tree and hoped that we could see the camp in the morning. Nyan said it might be the same tree Soe had used earlier to spy on the camp. We spent a long night waiting.

At dawn the little camp came into view. The porters appeared to be all roped together in a makeshift corral of bamboo. The soldiers awakened in their lean-to. They walked over and roused the porters with threats and curses.

The porters all stood preparing to pick up their burdens. They were dressed in rags. The SLORC contingent then turned their backs and started to lead their band of slaves off to work. The forced-labor party consisted of the old man, two women and two younger men.

Then, suddenly, without a word of rage or warning the old man slipped out the forty-five and with both hands opened fire on the soldiers. He hit one squarely in the back, which threw him onto his face. The next one he caught in the right rear shoulder spinning him around and knocking him down. The last one was bringing up his weapon looking this way and that, unsure where the attack was coming from—the porters, apparently, were to his mind not an option. He had just started firing blindly in our general direction when Nyan dropped him with a well-aimed shot.

We rushed the camp. Nyan and I checked the bodies. The one with the shoulder wound had died of shock and general trauma. Forty-five caliber bullets will do that to a kid.

The porters had retreated to their bamboo prison; that is, all except the old man, who stood limply with the big Colt dangling from his bony hand. Nyan walked up to him and without a word the old man handed him the pistol butt first.

Since the explosive, but short, firefight last night had brought no other SLORC down on us I thought that we had a good chance of getting back to Manerplaw.

“Think we should get going back to camp?” I asked Nyan.

“Not you,” he replied, “us. You go on to the river. These porters will help me get Soe back to camp. I won’t need your help now.” The look on his face said he meant it.

The thought of going on alone scared me. The thought of another dry season fighting the SLORC scared me even more.

“Sounds like a plan,” I said.

Later, I was glad to see that the porters appeared to join the Karen fighters willingly. They rigged a litter out of rough poles and thatch from the lean-to and put Soe on it. He had slipped into delirium. I doubted he would make it. I did my best to push the guilty thoughts from my mind. I stood in the little clearing and watched them head off into the forest. This time it was Nyan who gave me the

thumbs-up high sign.

Before I cleared the area I poked around the campsite litter; that is, what was left of it after Nyan and his small party had removed all they could carry. The Burmese had been ill-equipped soldiers; a lot of the remaining gear was cheap Chinese junk. I counted a few dirty mess kits. And there seemed to be a lot of ruined camouflage clothing scattered around. I picked up a broken commando knife. There was also one unopened box of ammunition for the AK-47 Kalashnikov clones. The weapons themselves had been taken by Nyan and company.

Then there were the mines. Nyan had been forced to leave a couple of boxes of them behind. They were in two wooden crates that I knew contained twenty-four each. I used the broken Chinese commando knife to pry the lid off of one. The mines were packed in green foam peanuts.

I wanted a closer look since it was more than likely that this is what I might encounter on the surrounding trails. I gently lifted one out to examine it—disarmed for transport and deployment it presented no real threat. It weighed about twelve ounces. It was a Chinese Type 72 with a pressure trigger. It was made from frog-colored polyethylene and about the diameter of an audio CD. Its plastic composition made it hard to detect. Once planted and armed it would stay in the ground virtually forever, a random killer. In France there are still active mines from both World Wars.

Inside the lid of the crate I noticed an English name stenciled in red under a column of Chinese characters of the same color: Pacific Rin Trading Company PTE Ltd. ‘Rin’ not ‘Rim’. I smiled at the mistake. Asian English. Suddenly, I felt a chill and a burning urge to move on. I cursed, eased the mine back in its box and headed out of the camp.

Those eight kilometers to the river were the longest I have ever walked. The rickety ferry terminal was right at the end of the trail. It was still closed. I hailed a net fisherman and paid him to take me across. It was that easy.



Chapter 3

ONCE IN THAILAND I made my way to the Mae Sot Hotel, the only decent tourist-class establishment in the border town of the same name. The Mae Sot caters to the businessmen and military types who thrive on the border trade—most of it illegal—that goes on between Burma and Thailand: teak logs, gems, Buddhist relics, antiques and, of course, dope: cannabis and heroin.

It took two showers to wash off the grime of the trail. I was exhausted. The bed was made Thai style: bottom sheet only and a thin blanket. The air-conditioner was working valiantly against the humidity, but the room, though clean, still smelled like a moldy washcloth, the perfume of the tropics.

When I woke up the first thing I wanted to do was check email for news of Terry, but it was clear that a log on would require some hardware modifications to the ancient phone jack and I needed to call my boss, Supa, as well. Besides, there might be some news of Terry at the office.

I got Supa on the phone. He had a special interest in the business ramifications of the coming SLORC offensive. I asked him if he had any ideas for the story.

“Write what you want to about Manerplaw, you fucker,” he replied. “Not boring crap like that trade round story you just turned in though. Who going to read

that kind of boring shit? You just want to see your girlfriend in Washington.”

Supa was just teasing. I knew he really liked the story.

“But I want some good pictures of the Karen soldiers,” he went on. “Really good pictures like that dog meat warehouse you and Mr Lek sniff out in Khon Khaen. Bloody gorgeous! Did you see the spread? They love that on the mainland. You eat any doggie, Ted? Good for you. Keep you hot inside.” He laughed.

“I left it all for you,” I said. “I had lots in Cambodia. Make me a wild man. Hey, I got a project for you.”

“And I have a question for you.”

“What?”

“Has my girlfriend contacted the office?”

“Why you asking me? Oh, that right. She supposed to be here already. You stuck up there a long time.” He paused. “No, seriously, Ted, I’d have heard. I don’t think she called. But don’t change the subject. I got a job for you.”

“What, a photo assignment?” I liked taking pictures more than I liked writing. It was easier.

“No, I said a job. I got idea for publication company. Need somebody to run it. You know anybody?”

This was an old battle. “No, I don’t.”

“Come on, Ted. When you going to grow up and get real job? Manerplaw,” he snorted derisively. “A hundred kids want to go to Manerplaw and take pictures. What? You go there and step on a fucking mine. What I’m going to do for luck?”

“Buy a rabbit’s foot.”

“I going to have Warren look at your travel budget.” He was practically yelling. “You spending too goddamn much, a whole month in Washington. You visit you girlfriend then write a bunch of boring crap. Pictures of Thais in suits. Now you running around in the bush taking pictures.”

He had conveniently forgotten I was also delivering money for him. “I’ll quit,” I said. “I don’t want to work in an office.”

“Why you such a fucker? I always worry about you finding trouble.”

“Trouble? Me? Supa, I promise, no more trouble. You want trouble? Put me in some tower in Singapore.” It went on like that for a while. When he threatened to cancel my corporate Amex card I hung up on him.

After I hung up on Supa, I spent about fifteen minutes reworking the phone lines in my room to accommodate my modem hookup. It’s easier than it sounds.

I am a confirmed techno-info junkie and have been for years. I have been known to fetch email using a cell phone and a lap top in a bamboo beach shack.

BANGKOK SLIP

No one could accuse me of being a computer professional, however, just a gadget lover and a digit head. The obsession goes back, too. No one believes me, but I first logged on as a kid, via an acoustic coupling modem and a teletype, to a time-share hookup on the big IBM machine in the Empire State Building in 1967. Woohoo.

A while after my phone call to Supa I checked my e-mail for messages from Terry. We had communicated by email for the last year. The frequent correspondence really fanned the long-distance friendship, which in turn had ignited into love (well, sex) on my last visit. Now I suspected her of planning it all.

I got the hotel operator to dial the Bangkok number for my Internet service provider. After a couple of tries I got the carrier signal, told her to hang up, got a data handshake and I was able to log on right from the Mae Sot Hotel.

The first email message contained an index of stories from an electronic clipping service I employed. Several items interested me. I retrieved them for later reading. The computer had chosen a short list based on my preferences: "Asia Now '94 Trade Exhibition in New York Boasts Record Crowds"; "House Considers 'Sense of Congress' Resolution Censuring Thailand and Burma for Human Trade"; "Congressman Targets Flesh Trade in Asia for Punitive Legislative Action"; "Appleton of Indiana Calls for Pullout of US investment in Burma"; "Appleton Introduces 'Free Burma Act' to Senate Floor." I filed the text. I was anxious to get to my personal email. The POP server delivered my files. I logged off to read. All the ones that mattered were from Terry:

September 24

Hi Ted, Hope you arrived okay...Well, it's happening. I just get goose bumps. I got the proposal from Sal and his partner, Mr Paul, and even if it was half as good I would still come. The salary is more than I make here. And think how far it will go. I can really \$ave :-) They are going to give me a house to live in and there will be a maid and a gardener. The house is in Banglumpoo district, hope I spelled it right ;-) Is that a good neighborhood? Anyway, that's not all. I get a car and a driver, too. I will have to work six days a week, but I do mostly anyway. There are three shops planned, all in hotels. Shoot me a message when you get back from, where was it, Mannerplow?

Love times a million, Terry

There was another one dated several days later:

September 27

Hi Ted

Looks like it's really happening, and soon. Can you meet me at the airport? I understand it's a big one. Mr Paul is arranging a car, but I would love it if you can be there :-) I'll give you the date soon.

Love Love, Terry.

Then there was one more:

October 3,

Hi Ted, guess you're not back yet :-(I was hoping you could meet me at the airport, but I'm not going to count on it. I guess traveling where you went can be unpredictable :-(I have a ticket for Thai Air Flight 373 from New York. I'll arrive on the fifth at 22:00. My head is spinning. They really want me to get started right away. Business is business they said and they are afraid that competition is going to open. Sal has promised to have the movers come and put my stuff in storage. They are even paying for that. Can you imagine? I love you so much. I can't believe I'll see you in only a few days. I'll call you when I get there. I hope you are back by then. I have the NA numbers you gave me, too. Thanks.

All I'm taking really is a suitcase. Sal says I might be able to fly back and take care of loose ends. My mom is pissed about it. Says I am abandoning her. Oh well, she can take care of herself.

Love, Terry

The fifth! It was now the twenty fifth. I had been scheduled to return on the first. Terry had been in Bangkok for over two weeks while I was stuck in Manerplaw. A sense of unease overcame me. She had not sent me an arrival message, but then she had no easy way to do it. She had no portable computer, so she maybe she would not be able to send me anything once she landed. So, okay, no arrival message. We had not talked about it. The plan had always been for me to meet her. Damn.

Her message didn't even say where she was going to stay I opened the folder and looked at the mail again. On second reading Terry's employment package seemed very generous. Too generous.

I would have expected Terry's package to be akin to one given an Australian Health Club manager I knew. Western salary, health benefits, good vacation, but the Aussie had to leave every three months to renew her visa because she had no

BANGKOK SLIP

work permit. That was it. No car. No house. That, more or less, would have been the kind of offer Terry could have expected.

Terry's offer was the kind of expatriate bubble provided to a British finance wizard brought in to sweep up a banking crisis or to an ambassador. It was not the kind of deal proffered to a hair butcher to run a Salon, no matter how beautiful she was or how handy she happened to be with the books and barber shears. Most accredited diplomats don't even rate a walk-around house with a maid and a garden-er along with car and driver gratis.

What was worse I had not even made time to check into Mr Paul. The more I thought about her letter, the more anxious I began to feel. I wished we had talked before she got on the plane.

I tried to rationalize. They are just trying to lure her here to run their shops. They will give her the maid—help is cheap enough—and an apartment near the hotel (not a house) and then they will tell her that the driver and car will have to wait awhile until profits are better; that they will be forced to pay her less than promised, but will make it up later. She will get the house soon, very soon.

Yes, I said to myself, that's the style: offer with the right hand and take with the left. In Thailand a signed contract is a point of departure, not a done deal. Once here she will be more malleable. Not to worry, I thought, that's all it is, the good old Thai bait and switch. She'll be fine.

I didn't know what to do. Call Sal? Call who? Anyway, it was the middle of the night in Washington. I did call my office to see if Terry had left any kind of message. No, she had not, but I got a few more. One was from Ed, my friend in NA. I called his house, but he was not there. I decided not to overreact. My experience has been that tragedy generally takes place between my ears. Generally.

A while later, as I drifted off, intuition shifted within me like a shark glimpsed beneath the waves, a ripple of instinct surfaced and unquieted the waters so carefully oiled with reason. As a recovering addict I have learned the hard way not to lie to myself—at least not for long. And the truth is that Bangkok is a city of whores, heroin and pederasts. My last thought as I sank into a troubled sleep was that if Terry wanted a change of scene and a new job she would be better off working the graveyard shift in a Maine sardine cannery. I should never have encouraged her to come.

I should have gone to her.

I am bumping my way down row upon row of freshly skinned dog carcasses hanging head down in an abattoir. I hear the roar of a land mine, Soe screaming,

three shots from a forty-five banging over and over. The feel of a boy's still-warm neck resting lifeless under my questing fingertips.

I awoke in total darkness. I looked at my watch: 3:00am. I had slept twelve straight hours on top of the bedclothes, fully dressed, like a drunk, like a junkie. My mouth felt like a storm sewer.

It was 3:00pm in Washington DC. I rose, washed my face and got the switchboard to call Terry's work number. I thought that Salvodoro might be at the shop. I heard it ringing: Terry's sexy contralto. My heart caught, but it was a recording: "EuroStyle is closed for the day" I left a message for Salvodoro that included the Mae Sot Hotel's phone and fax number. I asked him to let me know Terry's location in Bangkok.

I wanted to call someone else, but couldn't immediately think of anyone. I scanned the listings in my PDA. Of course! Sally M, her NA sponsor, friend and mentor. Terry was in close contact with her. She worked for the government. I had both her numbers. I called her at work. She answered herself on the second ring with a quiet 'Hello?'

I recognized her voice. "Hi, Sally; Ted, Terry's friend."

"How you doin' baby? Guess you looking for your Terry. She left out of here, you know."

"I know."

"Well, then, you know that girl's a damn nuisance. She left me no address, just the name of her hotel over there. Said she would fax over to the office soon as she landed, but I got nothing so far. I'm a little worried. Now here you are looking for her. I thought she with you."

"I was—we were—," I stammered. Then I collected myself. "I got stuck in a war zone, Sally. I couldn't get away. I didn't expect her to come so soon and I was supposed to be back weeks ago, anyway." I put my finger in my left ear against a big commotion in the hall. Someone was singing Hey Good Lookin' in drunken English with a heavy Thai accent. It took a while, but Hank Williams finally got popular up here. It was hard to hear Sally over the din. "You know what I told her: 'Wait a bit, honey, talk to Ted first.' I won't sugar coat it for you, Teddy. self-will run riot rushed her on out this city like a runaway train. Told her, too. Now where'd I put that hotel name? I sure am glad for you two, though. I figured on this a long time ago. She always talked you up. Here it is. Got a pencil?"

"Yeah."

She read me the hotel name: "The Excelsior Hotel, Bangkok. Don't worry. She'll turn up; bad penny like that. Anyone can take care herself, baby, it's Terry."

BANGKOK SLIP

“Thanks, Sally.”

“Glad to help. Tell her I love her.” She hung up.

The Excelsior Hotel, a big name in Rome, but of no account in Bangkok. I looked for it in my Thai Airways Airline Schedule Guide. There was a long list of hotels in the back. Not there. A really small outfit then—or non-existent. I cursed out loud.

I looked in my electronic phonebook for someone else I could call. I thought of the Thai partner, Mr Paul.

Now I had met Mr Paul at Sal’s renovation party the year before. The Thai had given me his card I remembered. We had chatted a bit in Thai, although his English was better than my Thai. I thought to use him as a source for the annual trade talk story. I also remembered removing his card from my card holder when he proved polite and affable, but coy and uncooperative. Then I remembered entering his name into the limited memory of my palm top. I searched and there it was: Mr Paul: Hay Adams Hotel, Room 506. I wanted to kick myself. I had not copied in the copious Thai address or his long, real Thai name or his Thai phone number.

I could try to track him down through the Thai Embassy since he came with an official trade delegation—I had, after all, met him while covering the trade conference—but it was a daunting prospect. I strained to remember his real Thai name; ‘Mr Paul’ was only an adopted Western working name. It would not appear on an official Thai guest roster. His real name began with a ‘P’ too, but then so many Thai names do.

Who else might know of Terry’s whereabouts? No one in NA. If her sponsor had no phone and address then no one did. I thought back to the party: who else? A doughy face swam into view. The answer was obvious, once I thought of it. Terry’s mother. I had only met her that one time—I was a bit surprised to see her at the party—and I remember I had no number, but I recalled her first name and hoped her last was the same as Terry’s. I dialed directory assistance for Washington (an international call) got the number and selected the auto dial option.

A female voice answered the phone: “Hello, may I help you?” If God had a receptionist she would sound like that, I thought.

“Mrs Parks?”

“No, this is her friend, Sam, who may I say is calling?”

“Ted Oldfield,” I replied.

“I’ll let her know.”

Presently, a new voice picked up the phone.. “Yes,” said a whiskey tenor. The

's' was wet. I knew she drank.

"This is Ted Oldfield; I'm a friend of Terry's."

I got silence so I pressed on.

"I just got a letter from Terry. She said she was going away, to Bangkok. I'm in Bangkok and I want to find her—I, we got our signals crossed?"

"What did Sam say your name was?" she asked.

"Ted... Ted Oldfield, I met you briefly at Salvadoro's opening party last year. When he opened shop number four."

"Terry's big gentleman friend?"

"That's right."

"Well, she's gone out of town."

"Thanks," I stifled a groan, "I knew that. I was just wondering if you had her new address."

"Yes. Some stuffy hotel with a stuffy name. She told me, but I don't remember. Girl just left her mom here all alone. What's a use of writin'. I reckon her boss would know where she was. Guess you could call him. Bye—"

"Wait. Do you know his number by any chance? I'm overseas and—"

"I don't think... But maybe..." I heard a thump as the receiver fell. I waited.

"You still there?" she asked, panting.

"On the line," I replied.

"Well, turns out I do got it. His number is nine six six, seven three four two. I reckon that's the best I can do."

"Thanks a lot Mrs Parks. Is there anyone else you know who might know where Terry is, any other friends you know?"

"I don't know none of Terry's friends."

"Well, take care of yourself and let me give you my address in Bangkok so if Terry calls you can—"

"I doubt she'll call, but I'll tell her you did if she does. And don't worry about Terry. I taught her to take care of herself. Good bye." She hung up.

I called Salvadoro's home number it and got the answering machine. I left a message with the Mae Sot number, my Bangkok home number and my office number.

I made one more call to my friend Ed in Bangkok. Since it was 3:00am I knew he'd be up. I just hoped I could catch him at home. He left me a message earlier at the office.

I got him on the second ring.

"What's up?" he said.

BANGKOK SLIP

“Hi, Ed,” I said.

“Ted,” he replied. He spread out my name for a few seconds of airtime. “Welcome back. Glad you didn’t step on a mine. Everybody thought you died, man. Terry was worried.”

“Terry? You saw Terry?”

“Yeah, she showed at a meeting.”

Hallelujah, I thought. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“What? She didn’t give you a number?”

“She did. Well, she gave it to Jan—you know, another woman and all—but Jan tried to reach her. It’s no good. Jan says the hotel says she checked out, no forwarding address. We thought she would show at the next meeting, but she didn’t. I called your office. I.. ”

“Thanks Ed. No, I just got back. I was stuck in Manerplaw.”

“Glad you made it out. Bangkok Post said shit is getting bad up there.”

“That it is.”

We both came up with ideas about where Terry might be, but we were spinning wheels. I told Ed I was worried. He did his best to reassure me. But the unspoken worry that we shared was that Terry had gone out. Slipped. Relapsed. It happens. And no recovering person is ever immune.

I said goodbye and hung up. Then I tried Jan. No answer. Asleep or not home. I cursed.

Ed could not have given me worse news. With only one NA meeting per week in Bangkok Terry would have been there even if her legs had been chopped off. NA was her life. I doubted that she was lost; she had found it once. And, if she had moved, why hadn’t she called her new NA friends and told them?

There was no more room for self delusion. Terry had arrived and met with a problem, and a bad one at that. I did my best to dismiss the most obvious one; that is, that she had slipped. But that only amplified my worst fears. If not that, then what?